Jaden Michael Reed
ADDRESS AND
PHONE NUMBER
WITHELD
jadenmichaelreed02@gmail.com ***(For business inquiries only)***

Toronto Bound (Sneak Peek)

Jaden Michael Reed, Young Adult

Chapter 1

It was another day for Johnathan Sykes. He woke up in his bed feeling tired after staying up until one in the morning working on his Buy Me Some Tea commissions. Two years ago, he had just finished his four-year term at CalArts in Santa Clarita, California, and currently lives at his parents' house in Fresno, California. Johnathan gets out of bed and sits at his desk, opening his laptop. He logs onto Buy Me Some Tea and checks his commissions.

"Still have five commissions to complete this week," Johnathan said to himself. "Damn."

Johnathan then opens an art program and pulls out a drawing pad linked to his computer. He grabs a digital pen and begins drawing on it. He draws an anthropomorphic bear with white fur and short hair-like fur on its head with a blue stroke in a style reminiscent of UPA, Disney, and Ralph Bakshi's combined style. As he draws, he hears a knock on his door. His father enters his room.

"Good morning!" Johnathan's father said as he walked up to his son. "Missing breakfast as usual, I see."

"Dad, I've been working on commissions all week," Johnathan said while still facing his laptop. "Right now, I'm drawing this commission for an Instagrammer's fursona, and it's due in a couple of-"

"Not this 'commission' crap again, son. We talked about this."

Johnathan puts his digital pen down and turns toward his father. "Dad, come on."

"Son, you *can't* make money off of these paid online requests forever. It doesn't pay the bills."

"I know it won't pay bills, Dad, but finding a job hasn't been easy for me. No one in the area wants to hire me full-time as an artist or animator. These commissions are all I have to go on."

"Son, we're not talking about being an artist or animator like that, Ralph… Bookcase guy you're obsessed with. We're talking about a real job."

"Dad, I don't want a real job! I want to follow my dream of being an animator and moving to Canada."

"You say that *every* time we talk about this, son. And your mom and I always tell you the same thing. You can't just move to Canada and become an animator. You need to apply for permanent residency, you need to have experience."

"I know it's not easy to become a permanent resident in another country, Dad. I'm not stupid. And I have experience: four years at CalArts in Santa Clarita, an online portfolio, and a social media presence."

"We only let you go to that expensive school because you wouldn't shut up about it for months. All the animators you like that went there, the 'A113' thing, etcetera, etcetera. I-It's stupid. Your whole idea of becoming a Canadian animator is just a damn pipe dream. That's all it is."

Johnathan looked at his Dad with an emotionless look, almost hesitating for a few seconds before turning to his laptop. Johnathan saved his drawing on his laptop before shutting it down and closing it. He got up from his chair and grabbed his backpack. He walked towards his bedroom door.

"Where are you going?" Johnathan's father asked.

"Out," Johnathan said bluntly as he grabbed his car keys. He walked out the front door, got into his used red 2007 Volkswagen Beetle, and drove off for a drive downtown to clear his mind. He turned on the radio and switched to the local rock station, where "Heart-Shaped Box" by Nirvana was playing.

Johnathan always felt like his parents were the most unsupportive people in the world. Ever since he was twelve, he had always dreamed of being an animator and creating the next great cartoon. Having watched cartoons growing up, Johnathan learned that most of their production had been outsourced to one country: Canada. Enamored with the Canadian cartoons he grew up watching, such as *ReBoot*, *Arthur*, *The Magic School Bus*, and *Total Drama Island*, alongside the works of animators such as Don Bluth, Ralph Bakshi, and Richard Williams, Johnathan decided that someday, he would move to Canada and create the next great Canadian cartoon after his favorite Canadian shows.

His parents, however, thought his dream was stupid and that cartoons were for children. Johnathan thought his parents were the kind of people who saw animation as children's media rather than a medium. His parents expected him to grow up to either be a lawyer or an engineer, but instead, Johnathan wanted to be an animator. His parents have tried encouraging him to participate in extracurricular courses such as welding or wood shop, but Johnathan chose classes like graphic design, art, and character design instead. Despite getting good grades in school and having an online following, his parents were still unsupportive of his dream.

As Johnathan continued his drive, he thought back to all the times his parents called his dream a "pipe dream." They had told him it wasn't possible so many times that he couldn't just move to Canada and become an animator. He knew it was hard to move to another country and find a job there, but it never stopped him from pursuing his dream. Was it finally time to leave

his unsupportive parents behind and move on with his life? Seeking answers, Johnathan decided to drive to his friend Steve Walker's apartment.

Steve had been Johnathan's childhood friend since elementary school. Like Johnathan, Steve wanted to pursue a creative career, only instead of being an animator like Johnathan, he wanted to be a writer. He pitched a few short film scripts to Johnathan a couple of times, hoping he would animate them. Steve makes a living by copywriting for local businesses in the area while writing stories on Writersblock on the side. Johnathan pulls up to the apartment complex Steve lives in and gets out of his car before locking it and entering the complex. Johnathan knocks on Steve's apartment door, and after a few seconds, Steve opens the door.

"Oh, Johnathan!" Steve said, surprised. "I didn't know you were coming over."

"Well, I thought I'd just pop in for a bit and have a chat," Johnathan said as Steve smiled. "It's about my parents…" Steve stopped smiling as Johnathan brought up his parents.

"Oh…" Steve said. "I-I'll get you a drink." Steve walked back into the house to his fridge as Johnathan walked in. Steve grabs two small energy drinks, one for himself and Johnathan, before closing the fridge. Johnathan sits on the couch as Steve gives him his drink and sits next to him. They both open their cans and begin drinking and talking.

"Steve, ever since I was twelve, I've always wanted to move to Canada and become a professional animator," Johnathan told Steve.

"Yeah, I even sent you a few of my scripts," Steve said.

"I've been working on one of them. I'm aiming for a Bakshi-type animation style, but that's not important. What's important is that my parents have been trying to discourage me for years! I know it's hard to move to Canada, but they can't just tell me I can't do it!"

"John, your parents *still* don't get what you wanna do? They don't care about what you want to do or where you want to live?"

"Yeah, Steve. They've been like that for twelve years now. I can't take it anymore! All I want to do is be an animator, but I'm not gonna get there if I keep staying with my toxic parents! I'm only *lucky* to be an animator in general because my parents don't like to take my stuff away when I'm not in trouble!"

"John, you're twenty-four years old. You should be making your own decisions. You shouldn't even be staying with toxic, unsupportive people like your parents. You need to emancipate yourself, cut off all contact between you and your parents, and follow your dream of being a professional animator. If you don't leave now, you'll never break free," Steve told Johnathan.

Johnathan looks at Steve for a moment before finishing his energy drink and putting the empty can on the table. After a moment of silence, Johnathan turned to Steve.

"You know what, Steve?" Johnathan asked. "You're right. I *should* be making my own decisions. I can't just let them treat me like that forever. If I stay with them, I'll end up like the guy from that one A24 movie. What was it called again? Something about TVs? I don't care! I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna walk up to my parents, tell them I want to move to Canada and be an animator, call their behavior out, and get out of Fresno!"

"John, are you sure about this? It's not gonna be easy driving to Canada, and knowing your parents, they're probably gonna say no."

"I don't care what my parents say anymore, Steve. 'You can't do this.' 'You can't do that.' 'Your dream is unrealistic, get a real-' That's enough! I'm going to get away from them and follow my dream. It's like you said: If I don't leave now, I'll never break free."

"If that's what you want, I'm not gonna stop you. It's your decision, John," Steve said.

Johnathan got up from the couch, grabbing his empty energy drink can before putting it into Steve's recycling bin in the kitchen. He then walks up to Steve's apartment door. Before leaving, he turns to Steve. It was going to be a long time until he could see his friend again.

"We'll keep in touch, Steve," Johnathan said. "Goodbye."

Johnathan walks out of Steve's apartment and to his car, unlocking it with his keys and getting inside. He starts the car and drives through the desolate city back to his parents' house. It was time to leave his parents behind and begin his new life in Canada. Arriving home, he got out of his car and locked it before entering his parents' house. Unless his parents change their mind, it will be the last time he ever comes here. He walks into his parents' living room, where they are watching reruns of old sitcoms on TV.

Johnathan walks up to his mother and father.

"Mom, Dad, there's something I need to tell you," Johnathan said.

"Honey, if it's that unrealistic dream of yours again-" Johnathan's mother said. Before she could finish, Johnathan interrupted her.

"It's *not* unrealistic!" Johnathan said assertively. "I know it's not easy to move to another country, and I know it's gonna be hard finding a job once I get there, but I'm still gonna do it!"

Johnathan's parents sit stunned by what their son is saying.

"What?" Johnathan's father asked.

"I'm not gonna take your crap anymore!" Johnathan told both his parents. "Ever since I was twelve, you've always discouraged my dream! You always told me animation was 'kids' stuff!' You always said my dream of being an animator was just another damn… Whatever! Well, I'm done! You two are toxic, unsupportive, and mean! I always hoped that you'd change

your minds one day, and I still do. But until then, I will not be contacting you, visiting you, or following you online! I'm cutting you off!"

Johnathan's parents remained seated on the couch, stunned. They had never seen their son this angry and assertive before.

"I'm old enough to make my own decisions now. I'm going to drive to Canada and follow my dream! This'll be the last time you *ever* discourage me!"

Johnathan looks at his parents for a moment and takes some heavy breaths. He had never blown up like this before, not to his parents or his friends. His parents remain stunned by their own son calling them out. They seem to have gotten the message. Johnathan walks to his old room and grabs his backpack, suitcase, and laptop bag. He packs his clothes, his tablet, his digital pen, his laptop, his blanket and pillow, his notebooks, his art supplies, and his toiletries from his annexed bathroom. After getting everything he needs packed, he grabs his wallet and car keys and storms out of his old room.

He walks past the living room and takes one final look at his parents, for now. They are still stunned from his chew-out, but they decide that even if his dream *is* unrealistic, like they believe, they will not stop him. If he fails, he'll have no choice but to come back to them. Johnathan walks out the door and onto the curb. Before doing anything else, he takes one last look at his old house, for now. He then puts his things in the trunk before getting in the car.

He starts the car and drives away from his parents' house. He looks at his old house through the rearview mirror and grips the steering wheel tightly. Was he really doing the right thing? He just chewed his parents' toxic behavior out and is leaving them. He felt like he should turn back and apologize. But then, he remembers the way they treated him and his dream and

decides against it. He keeps driving until he is out of his old neighborhood. His journey to Canada to find himself has just begun.

Chapter 2

As Johnathan looked at downtown Fresno one last time, for now, he began to ponder whether or not he had made the right decision. Sure, he had to get away from his parents' toxicity, but this is the first time he has ever been out on his own. He had to take care of himself, plan his own budget accordingly, deal with unfamiliar people, and, more importantly, somehow manage to scrape up enough money to apply for a Canadian PR card and rent in Canada! Seeking to take his mind off things, he decided to stop at the nearest park before leaving Fresno. After a ten-minute drive, he arrives at a large park with a playground, picnic area, community garden, and a walking path.

Johnathan gets out of the car and walks around the park. He takes in the luscious green scenery, such as the flowers from the community garden, the adorable free library next to the restrooms where people could leave or take a book, the trees planted across the park, and the sight of children playing on the playground. Seeing the children playing on the playground brought back happier memories for Johnathan, when his parents supported him and didn't care about what he wanted to do or where he wanted to live. Back then, he and his parents were happy… Until the day Johnathan told his parents he wanted to be an animator and move to Canada when he grew up. Then, his parents became less supportive of what he wanted to do and, eventually, they became toxic.

The bittersweet thought of the happy memories with his parents and their inevitable development into unsupportive and toxic parents made Johnathan cry a little. But then, he heard two acoustic guitars strumming to the tune of "Save Tonight" by Eagle-Eye Cherry in the distance. Wiping the tears from his eyes and seeking to take his mind off of his bittersweet memories, Johnathan walks up to the source of the strumming. He begins to hear two girls with

similar voices singing. After a few seconds, he reaches the source of the strumming and singing: two girls, one with blonde hair and the other with brunette hair, likely twins, are each strumming their acoustic guitars and singing. They have a black bucket hat out for people passing by to leave them tips for their music.

Johnathan looks at the twins and begins swaying to the music and smiling. At least it was something to take his mind off his parents and his youth. As the girls keep playing and Johnathan keeps dancing, a few people pass by, listen to the music, and leave the girls some tips, mostly one or five dollar bills. These girls were very talented and great musicians. What surprised Johnathan was how nobody stayed for the full song or gave a round of applause to the musical talent. The twins' musical talent, like Johnathan's artistic skills, was underappreciated by the public.

After singing the chorus to "Save Tonight" for a second time, the girls finished playing. Johnathan begins applauding their music.

"*Okay*!" Johnathan said as he clapped. "Are you two incredible, or what?"

"Thank you," one of the twins sitting to the left of the other said. "I'm Gwen, and this is Greta…"

"And we're 'The Johnson Twins!'"

"That's funny," Johnathan said, smiling. "You have 'John' in your names; I have 'John' in mine, too!"

Johnathan and the Johnsons laughed at the comparison for a few seconds

"I should follow you two. You're amazing!" Johnathan said. "Do you have like an Instagram, YouTube, Threads, TikTok, or Bluesky?"

"We have all five!" Gwen and Greta said simultaneously.

"Great! What's your social media handle?"

"It's johnson-dot-twins," Gwen said.

Johnathan pulls out his phone, opens Instagram, and searches for the Johnsons' Instagram page by typing in their handle. He finds their page chock full of music-related images and Reels with 199 followers and follows it.

"And I am *officially* your two-hundredth follower on Instagram!" Johnathan said. He then puts his phone away and takes out his wallet. He pulls out a random dollar bill and leaves it in the hat. "I'll check your music out. Have a nice day!"

Johnathan then walks away from the bench and continues his walk in the park. The twins smile at each other and pick up the bill Johnathan gave them from their bucket hat. They are shocked when they see that he had somehow left them a hundred dollar bill. This was the biggest tip the Johnsons had ever gotten, but did he give them $100 on accident? Immediately, the Johnsons packed up their guitars and ran towards Johnathan.

"Hey!" Gwen yelled to Johnathan, getting his attention. "Hold on a minute!"

Johnathan turned around and looked at the girls approaching him. "Yeah?"

The girls stop in front of Johnathan. "Did you mean to give us this?" Greta asked while showing him the $100 bill.

Johnathan realizes he accidentally gave the girls an expensive tip. "Oh, my go- I am so sorry!" Johnathan said as he took the $100 back. He then pulls out his wallet, puts the $100 back, and looks at the money inside before taking a $5 bill out and giving it to the Johnsons. "I meant to give you five dollars. I need this money for my trip."

"Where are you going?"

"To Canada," Johnathan said.

The girls gasp and look at each other for a moment before turning to Johnathan. “We’ve always wanted to move to Canada someday!”

“Really?” Johnathan asked.

“Yes! They’ve got *Total Drama Island*, Jim Carrey, Swiss Chalet, Barenaked Ladies, Celine Dion, Tara Strong—our favorite voice actress who’s been in *everything*, the Maxibon, *and* the Coffee Crisp bar!”

“Hey, I’ve tried that candy bar. I got it in the import section of a candy shop in Clovis once.”

“We *really* want to move there someday! We have no means of getting there on our own, and we can’t afford a plane ticket.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Take us with you, please!” Greta said.

Johnathan was shocked by what they were asking. Johnathan taking two talented strangers he just met with him on his trip to Canada? It seemed ridiculous, strange, and downright wrong! After a moment of silence, Johnathan finally spoke.

“I’m sorry, girls, I-I can’t help you,” Johnathan said before walking off.

The girls looked at each other in shock before walking up to Johnathan.

“Why not?” Greta asked.

“Look, I understand you want to go to Canada badly; it even sounds like you know a lot about the place, but I can’t just take two strangers with me on this trip. Besides, I need to get away.”

“From what?”

“From my parents!”

The girls are surprised and stop walking in front of Johnathan. Johnathan stops walking as well.

"My parents, they've been toxic and unsupportive of my dream for a long time, and I need to get away from them. Going to Canada is my only chance to break free. I know you feel bad for me, but I can't help you. Have a nice day!"

Johnathan begins walking toward his car. He didn't have time to be pestered by two girls he just tipped for their great music. After a few seconds, Gwen spoke up.

"Hey!" Gwen said. Johnathan stopped walking and turned to the twins. "Our parents are unsupportive, too."

"What?" Johnathan asked as he walked back up to the twins. What Gwen said piqued his interest.

"Our parents… They're a lot like yours…"

"Johnathan. Johnathan Sykes."

"Johnathan, ever since we were ten, we've always wanted to be successful musicians. Our parents, however, think our dream is stupid. They've been discouraging us for years, trying to steer us off our own path and make us follow theirs. We've had it rough since we've been living with them. We don't have jobs. We're broke. We have to live with our parents. And we make little money from street performing and social media. That's why we want to get away. We *need* to get away from our parents, and we think you're the only one who can help."

"Please take us with you, Johnathan," Greta said.

Johnathan couldn't believe what he was hearing. Two twins he had just met have had it rough with their parents, much like his own. They want to follow their dream of being famous

musicians, but they've been discouraged by their parents for a long time. What if it wasn't strange and wrong to bring them along? After another moment of silence, Johnathan spoke.

"Do you girls like Jack in the Box?"

At a Jack in the Box in Fresno, Johnathan and the twins were sitting at a table with their food. Johnathan has a big breakfast sandwich with onion rings and a medium-sized drink, while Gwen and Greta each have a burger, fries, and a medium-sized drink.

"Okay…" Johnathan said awkwardly. He couldn't believe he was *actually* letting two strangers he just met tag along with him on what was now *their* trip to Toronto. "Gwen and Greta Johnson, was it?"

"Yup!" The twins said simultaneously.

"Since we haven't properly introduced ourselves, I figure we start with that. I'm Johnathan Sykes, an artist and animator. That's 'J-o-h-n-a-t-h-a-n,' not 'J-o-n-a-t-h-a-n,' common misconception. I was born on March 14, 2001, on 'the day that Krabs fries,' if you know what I mean."

The Johnsons started laughing, recognizing the reference. "We *love* that movie!" Greta said.

"I graduated from CalArts two years ago and have been living with my parents until today. Now, I am going to drive all the way to Canada and move there, and you two are gonna be coming along with me," Johnathan said.

Johnathan signals the girls to introduce themselves.

"Oh, you already know our names, and if you guessed right, we're twins," Greta said.

"Yeah, that's what I thought when I saw you playing at the park," Johnathan said.

"We were born on April 16, 2003 and grew up playing all sorts of instruments, mostly the guitar and drums. You already know that we're really good."

"Oh, yeah, your cover of 'Save Tonight' was *really* awesome! I don't know how you girls aren't that well-known. Though to be honest, I'm not that well-known either."

"Hm."

"Anyways, if you're gonna be coming along with me on this road trip, there's gonna be a few rules. You two okay with that?"

"We don't care if there are rules, actually."

"Good. Rule number one: You must stick with me for the remainder of this trip, so we don't get lost. Rule number two: I don't care if you busk for money; you have to ask me first and make sure you don't get in legal trouble. Got it?"

"Got it! We've *never* gotten into legal trouble when we street-perform."

"That's what I like to hear. Rule number three: We jointly use our money for road trip essentials like food, gas, motels, and other necessities. If you want to spend your money on something you like, it must not be expensive, and you must ask me first."

"Is that all?" Gwen asked.

"That's all," Johnathan said. "If you follow these three basic rules, we'll have a safe and fun trip to Toronto."

"Whatever you say, Johnny!" Gwen said.

"'Johnny?' Now you're just trying to flatter me!"

"Well, we've gotta have nicknames! I mean, you don't always have to refer to us by our first names. You can refer to us as the 'Johnsons,' the 'Js,' or the 'Johnson Twins.'"

"Alright, 'Johnsons.' If that's what you want, it's fine by me! With that out of the way, you two strangers are officially going on the trip to Toronto!"

"Before we go with you as 'two strangers,' we're gonna have to tell our parents," Greta said.

"Well, if you insist," Johnathan said. "The worst they can say is 'no.'"

Less than an hour later, Johnathan drove the twins in his Beetle to their house in Clovis. Gwen and Greta got out of the car and opened the front door. Their mother sees them coming in.

"There you two are!" The twins' mother said. "Where have you two been?"

"We made a new friend, had lunch with him, and now…" Greta said.

"We're going on the road with him to move to Canada!" The twins said simultaneously.

Their mother was surprised as they walked past her and their father sitting on the couch.

"What'd they say?" The twins' father asked.

"They said they met some stranger, had lunch with him, and now they're going with him to move to Canada!" The twins' mother said.

"What?"

"Don't worry, I'll talk to them," The twins' mother said before walking up to their shared bedroom.

The twins were in their bedroom, packing what they needed. They pack their clothes, toiletries, acoustic guitars, shared laptop, and pillow and blanket each in their duffle bags.

"Gwen, Greta!" The twins' mother called out to her daughters as she walked up to their bedroom. "Are you both crazy? You can't just go off on your own with some stranger to Canada chasing that dumb dream of yours! How old is this guy, anyway?"

"Mom, he's twenty-four," Gwen said. "He's cool, friendly, and he *actually* appreciates our music!"

"Well, if you're gonna go with him, what are you gonna do for money?"

"We've got money saved up from our street performances to last us the entire trip, and we'll get jobs as soon as we get to Canada."

"Don't you know how hard it is to-"

"Don't you know how hard it is to have unsupportive people like you and Dad?" Gwen interrupted. The twins' mother stood in front of their door in shock.

"Ever since we started playing instruments and told you and Dad we wanted to be musicians, you've always been telling us how 'impossible' our dream is. It is *not* impossible, Mom. This guy is our only chance to follow our dreams. His name is Johnathan Sykes, and it's spelled with an 'h' in between the 'o' and first 'n.' He's the first person to *actually* appreciate our music. He's not just another one of our social media followers who barely listens to our work, and he's *not* like you and Dad towards our music!"

"Here we go again with your crazy dream of being famous musicians!" "Don't you know-"

"Enough!" Greta said. The twins grabbed each of their duffle bags and stormed out of their bedroom. "We're leaving!"

The twins walked out of their old house and opened the trunk of Johnathan's car. They each put their duffle bags in the trunk before closing it and getting in the back of Johnathan's car through the front passenger door. The twins' mother walks outside and sees Johnathan's car. As Johnathan starts the car, the twins' mother walks up to Johnathan.

"Hey!" The twins' mother called out, getting Johnathan's attention. Johnathan rolled his window down to hear her out. "Before you take my daughters anywhere, I've got something to tell you, mister!"

"It's Johnathan," Johnathan said.

"Whatever! If you put your hands on my daughters, I will-"

"He's *not* gonna do weird stuff to us, Mom!" Gwen said from the back.

"I don't care!" The twins' mother said. "If your impossible dream doesn't work out like your father and I know it will, you two are to come back to your house immediately! And you are to forget about that Johnathan person and never play music again!"

Hearing the twins' mother chew their dream out only reinforced their statement that their parents are unsupportive like Johnathan's. Having heard enough, Johnathan rolls up his window.

"What are you doing?" The twins' mother asked Johnathan. Johnathan ignores her and begins to drive off. "Hey! Hey!"

The twins' mother began running toward Johnathan's car before it finally leaves the street. She stops running and looks at it drive off into the distance with disbelief. Her own daughters just met this man who wants to move to Canada, but they trust him and go with him to pursue their impossible dream of being famous. Distressed, she walks back to her house with an upset look.

"Young adults…" The twins' mother said in disbelief. "I want my damn 20s back!"

Chapter 3

Now accompanied by Gwen and Greta Johnson on *their* trip, Johnathan focuses on the road, gripping the wheel tightly as the twins sit in the back. “Sweet Home Alabama” by Lynyrd Skynyrd is playing on the car's FM radio. Johnathan still couldn’t believe that he was now taking two strangers he had just met with him to Canada. Sure, they had unsupportive parents like he did, but did he really make the right decision in letting them come with him?

“So, Johnathan,” Gwen said. “Tell us a little bit about your artist-animator schtick.”

“What?” Johnathan asked.

“Like, what do you do? What have you made? What are your inspirations?”

“Oh, yeah. I do short animations, Buy Me Some Tea commissions, art and animations, and my inspirations come from Canadian cartoons and animators like Ralph Bakshi.”

“Who’s Ralph Bakshi?”

“Oh, Ralph Bakshi? He’s like the godfather of adult animation. He’s made movies such as *Fritz the Cat*, *Heavy Traffic*, *Street Fight*, no relation to *Street Fighter*, *Wizards*, *Fire and Ice*, and *Cool World*.”

“*Cool World*? Our cousin Ryder *loves* that movie!”

“I’ll bet he does, it’s one *wild* trip! Believe it or not, I’m actually working on this adult-animated pilot I plan on pitching to Dillon’s new adult-animation division. Before I tell you, you girls know what Dillon is?”

“Not really.”

“Dillon is like the modern Cinar of Canadian animation and one of Toronto’s premier animation studios. They’ve made shows such as *Gilbert the Rat*, *Policeman Paul*, *The*

Adventures of Felix Anders, and a few anime dubs and bad adaptations of good animated movies in recent years. They've recently launched an adult animation division-"

"Oh, my god, we were *obsessed* with *Gilbert the Rat* when we were younger!" Greta interrupted. "Not to mention, my mom thought it was better than *Caillou*."

"Yeah, Caillou is such a little spoiled turd. I don't know why Canadians thought a spoiled brat would be a great role model for kids," Gwen said.

"Yeah, I *never* liked him," Johnathan said. "*Arthur*'s so much better!"

"Yeah! *Arthur* was good!" Greta said. "That sucks it ended three years ago. Look out, *Simpsons*!"

Johnathan stops laughing and turns to the girls for a moment. "Now, about my pilot. It's called *The Dreamers' Cult*. It's about a group of creative teenagers who form a cult dedicated to following their dreams while seeking to escape from their unsupportive parents. It's a lot darker than it's supposed to sound. I based it on my parents and myself. I'll show you some of my work on it when we hit the nearest hotel or motel for the night."

"We would *definitely* watch that! Probably on something like Adult Swim. Did you know they already spun off into their own 24/7 channel in Canada?"

"Yeah, I saw a video online talking about it not too long ago. So, how about your 'schtick?'"

"Well, you know that we've been good with instruments since we were ten, but we think you should get to know our inspirations," Gwen said. "Our music stems from rock music. Bands like The Ramones, Guns N' Roses, Jet, Weezer, Le Tigre, Mötley Crüe, Genesis, Men at Work, Scorpions, and more! You ever listen to Scorpions?"

"No, not really."

"They're this awesome hard rock band from Hannover, Germany, and they've made some killer, rock-hard songs!"

"I wouldn't know them by name. But if I heard one of their songs, I'd know it."

"Does your Beetle have Bluetooth?"

"Yeah, but it's from 2009, so it's a little outdated."

Johnathan switches the radio from FM to Bluetooth and pulls out his phone from the cupholder. He turns on Bluetooth, connects it to the car, and opens YouTube. He hands his phone to the twins in the back.

"Alright, search up one of their songs, and I'll tell you if I've heard it," Johnathan said.

Gwen searches for something on YouTube and taps on a video. Scorpions' original recording of "Rock You Like a Hurricane" begins playing through the car speakers. The girls preferred the original 1984 version over the 2011 re-recording that's been used in too many modern films, TV shows, and commercials. They hated re-recordings of old and mostly iconic songs, especially Scorpions songs.

Johnathan listens to the song while driving and begins to remember hearing it before. He was nine years old and was on a road trip to Bloomington, Minnesota, with his parents. He recalls hearing this on a throwback FM station when he entered Bloomington. He begins stomping to the beat with his left foot and smiling.

"Oh, yeah!" Johnathan said excitedly. "Oh, *yeah*! I haven't heard this since I was nine!"

Johnathan began headbanging to the beat as the twins in the back joined along and began singing the lyrics to the song. Johnathan had just met these two girls, and already, they felt like they'd been friends for a long time. Getting to know the twins brought Johnathan a sense of relief

and trust in them. He knew that the trip was gonna be long, but at least he wouldn't be going on it alone now.

Johnathan and the twins' drive continued for six hours, passing by Bakersfield and Tehachapi. They stopped at some tourist destinations to take some photos and look around, but if they wanted gifts from their gift shops, they had to settle for the lowest-priced ones such as keychains, stickers, and enamel pins. It wasn't easy for them both, but they needed the money for a hotel or motel for the night. Sooner into their drive, they finally left California and entered the Nevada desert as the sun set, casting a colorful glow in the sky.

"And we are *officially* out of California!" Johnathan said. "So long, and thanks for all the beaches!"

"We're going going, out out, of Cali Cali!" Gwen and Greta sang simultaneously.

"Uh, uh!"

"We're going going, out out, of Cali Cali!" Johnathan and the twins sang together.

Johnathan and the twins laugh afterward, having fun with their jokes.

"One of Biggie's best," Johnathan said.

Johnathan then notices a big sign on the right side of the road.

"LOOKING FOR A PLACE TO STAY? STOP BY THE FIDUS FAMILY INN! KEEPING GUESTS COMPANY SINCE 2005! POOL, HBO, FREE BREAKFAST. 5 MILES TO THE RIGHT."

"Okay, girls, we're gonna be stopping for the night. We've just entered Nevada, and I think it's time for a break from the road."

"Aw, alright," the twins said, disappointed.

"We were kinda hoping we'd go all the way," Gwen said. "But if you want us to rest for the night, that's fine by us."

After driving five miles to the right, they finally reached the Fidus Family Inn. The inn had a retro, 1970s aesthetic, even though it opened in 2005. It was made from sandstone brick and blue pastel, the garish colors of the 1970s. Seeing the motel's design reminded Johnathan of the anachronistic suburbia from the Tim Burton movie *Edward Scissorhands*. Tim Burton's works were one of the inspirations for his art. Johnathan and the twins got out of the car and walked up to the reception office.

They enter the office and walk up to the front desk. The twins sit down in two chairs in front of the desk as Johnathan rings the bell. A receptionist and manager in his late 60s wearing a name tag that read, "Hi! I'm Al Fidus," comes out through a door behind the front desk and walks up to Johnathan.

"Good evening!" Fidus said with an American accent, smiling. "I'm the manager and receptionist here! Welcome to the Fidus Family Inn! How many are we checking in this evening?"

"Three adults just for tonight, please," Johnathan said, pointing at himself before pointing to the twins sitting behind him, ensuring Fidus knew who was with him.

"Okay," Fidus said. "And would you like to be in two vacant rooms annexed to each other for an additional fifty dollars?"

Johnathan thought about what he said for a moment. He didn't know if twins were okay sharing a bed or sleeping in separate beds.

"One second, please," Jonathan said. He then walks up to the twins sitting behind them.

"What's up?" Gwen asked.

"Gwen, Greta, are you two fine with sharing a bed, or do you want separate rooms?" Johnathan asked.

"Oh, no, it's cool," Gwen said. "Greta and I are cool with sharing a bed for the night. We don't think it's weird."

"Good. I just needed to make sure you were cool with sharing a bed." Johnathan said. He then turns back to the receptionist. "We'll just take a single room, please."

"Alright," Fidus said as he calculated the total price on a digital register. "Your total is $50. Will you be paying with cash or card?"

Johnathan pulls out his wallet from his pants' back pocket and takes out his credit card before giving it to Fidus. "Card, please."

Fidus takes the card and swipes it on the register. He gives Johnathan the keypad to enter his card PIN. Johnathan enters his PIN before Fidus returns his card, and Johnathan puts it back in his wallet. He puts his wallet back in his pocket as Fidus gives Johnathan the room key for the night. Johnathan signals the girls to follow him as they leave the office and walk towards the car. They open the trunk and grab their luggage before walking to their room..

They arrive at room 109, just next to the car, and Johnathan unlocks it with the room key. Their room is small with green and white-painted walls, a small flat-screen television with a remote control, two dark brown-frame double beds with white pillows and sheets, a dark oak end table in between the two beds with the motel's Wi-Fi password on a sticker stuck to the top of the table and dark oak flooring. There is an annexed sink with small and big white towels next to the bathroom.

"Well, it's not much, but at least it's cozy!" Greta said.

"This is nice for $50, not expensive like a Hilton," Gwen said.

Jonathan and the twins put their luggage down and unpack some of their things, such as their toiletries, Gwen and Greta's guitars, and Johnathan's drawing notebook. Johnathan opens his notebook and looks at his drawings.

"Whatcha got there?" Gwen asked. Johnathan looks up at the twins and smiles.

"Well, I said I would show you my drawings, so, here they are!" Johnathan said as he handed Gwen his notebook.

Gwen looks at the drawings and sees a heading on one of the pages reading "*THE DREAMERS' CULT* CHARACTERS." Beneath the heading are drawings of Johnathan's pilot's characters in a style inspired by Richard Williams and Ralph Bakshi's art styles. The first character drawing is a tall female character with long hair, a nose ring, and punk attire named Clara. The second is a short male character with short hair wearing a bucket hat and what appears to be a denim jacket holding a notebook named Sean. The third and final one is a female with plump lips, curly black hair, a crop top, shorts, and high-heeled shoes named Rebecca.

"Oh, wow!" Gwen said.

"Johnny, your art is kickin'!" Greta said. "What art style is this?"

"It's supposed to be a combination of, in your terms, *Cool World* and *Roger Rabbit*."

"Oh, these *definitely* look like they came from a combination of both movies, like if the animators… What were their names again, Johnny? You know this stuff."

"Ralph Bakshi and Richard Williams."

"Yeah, Bakshi and Williams if they collaborated! My favorite has to be Clara, she just *screams* punk rock!"

"Yeah, rock music is actually one of my favorite genres.".

"Thanks for showing this to us! We'll definitely watch it when you finish it."

"So, we're resting here for the night. What do you girls wanna do? Watch a movie? Order a pizza? Have a little creative brainstorming session?"

"Yeah, we're down for a movie! What're we gonna watch?"

"I don't know. I've got four streaming services: Netflix, Paramount+, Hulu, and Tubi."

"How about we watch… What was that one Ryan Reynolds movie again? The one where the girl can see imaginary friends and takes care of them, and it's like that one Cartoon Network show from the 2000s?"

"Are you talking about *IF*? I *love* that movie!"

"Yeah, *IF*!" Gwen said. "Greta and I love it, too! We love the part with the girl changing that retirement home for imaginary friends into her own vision while that one Tina Turner song plays. It's like one of the best scenes in the entire movie."

"Alright, *IF* it is, then!" Johnathan said.

Johnathan unpacks his Roku stick from his suitcase and plugs the cord into the wall behind the TV and dresser and the HDMI into the side of the TV. He walks up to the end table and looks at the Wi-Fi password on the sticker before turning on the TV and connecting his Roku to the internet. He opens Paramount+, searches for the movie, and turns it on for the girls.

"And now, our feature presentation!" Johnathan said as the movie played. The twins laugh for a moment.

"If it's cool with you, Johnny, I'm gonna go to the reception and see if they're selling snacks," Gwen said.

"That's fine. Don't get anything too expensive!"

"I know, we gotta reserve our money for the whole trip. I just wanna get us some popcorn and soda."

Gwen walked out of the room and up to the reception office. She found a section with snacks and bought three bags of microwave popcorn and three sodas with her money before walking back to the room. Johnathan and the twins spent the rest of the night watching *IF* and telling each other more about themselves. After the movie, they got tired and decided to settle down for the night. They each took a shower and brushed their teeth before falling asleep for the night.

At 11:55 in the evening, Gwen and Greta are sleeping together on the right bed, while Johnathan sleeps on the left bed. Gwen wakes up and gets out of bed. She walks to the sink room and turns on the light before entering the bathroom on the right of the sink. She uses the toilet before flushing, and walking out of the bathroom. She turns on the sink and washes her hands when she suddenly hears a noise from outside their motel room.

“What the?” Gwen said as she turned her head around.

Gwen turns off the sink and walks to the front door before opening it. Outside, she sees Johnathan’s car lifted by four jacks and what appears to be a mechanic underneath about to use a tailpipe cutter to remove a car piece. Specifically, the alleged mechanic was trying to steal Johnathan’s catalytic converter!

“Hey!” Gwen shouted to the mechanic loudly, getting his attention and waking up Greta and Johnathan. “What are you doing with Johnny’s car?!”

The alleged mechanic pulled out from underneath the car using a creeper. He was wearing a black mask to hide his identity. Johnathan and Greta got out of their beds and went outside to see what was going on. Gwen was lucky enough to catch the mechanic before he could successfully take the catalytic converter. The mechanic got up from the creeper and tried to run away, but Gwen gave chase.

Gwen proved to be faster than the mechanic and caught him in the act. She turned him around and snatched his mask off his head. To Gwen's shock, the mechanic turned out to be none other than the motel receptionist and manager, Al Fidus. Fidus gasps as Gwen's look immediately turns from shock to anger. She punches him in the face, knocking him out, and then panics and screams. She had just stopped a thief from stealing Johnathan's converter.

Johnathan and Greta rushed up to Gwen after seeing what had happened.

"Is that the manager?" Johnathan asked.

"I caught him trying to steal one of your car parts," Gwen said. "I think he was trying to steal your converter."

"Oh, my go- I'm calling the police!" Greta said. She ran back to their motel room and grabbed her phone before calling the police.

Half an hour later, a police car arrived and pulled into the motel driveway. The police car stopped before two police officers, Officer Bruce and Officer Kraft, got out of the car. The two officers walk up to Johnson and the twins holding Fidus.

"Well, well, well…" Officer Bruce said. "If it isn't Alfred Fidussen, the biggest car parts thief in Nevada."

Johnathan looked at Alfred before turning to the officers. "Wait, this guy's a criminal?"

"I punched a criminal?" Gwen said. The officers looked at Gwen with surprise. "I-It was a reflex! He was trying to steal parts from our car!"

"Boy, this isn't the first time anyone has checked into a 'Fidus Family' lodging," Officer Kraft said. "Alfred Fidussen here, or 'Al Fidus,' as he likes to call himself, has been setting up fake lodgings for the past 30 years here in Nevada. He's previously opened fake youth hostels,

cabin resorts, micro resorts, and motels. We don't know where the money he uses to build these fake lodgings comes from, but at every lodging he's built, he's stolen car parts such as brake pads, tailpipes, engines, car batteries, and most recently, catalytic converters, and resells them on the black market."

"I just wanted a source of income so I wouldn't be cut off from my family fortune!" Alfred said, now speaking in a distinct Danish accent.

"What?" Johnathan and the twins said simultaneously.

"Look, I come from a family of wealthy resort owners in Denmark. I enjoyed a privileged lifestyle before my parents sent me off to America to get a real job or risk getting cut off. I hated every job I had until I learned about the American black car parts market. I stole car parts for high prices on the market until I proved to my parents I was 'responsible' by passing off my black market income as legitimate. Since then, I've been using the family fortune to build lodging resorts here in America, but I never lost the thrill of stealing car parts. All the resorts ended up being covers for my operation."

"So Jesper Johansson here has been building fake resorts and stealing car parts all because he didn't want to lose access to his family's wealth?"

"Yeah, it sounds like it," Officer Kraft said to Johnathan. "We've been trying to catch him for years. He tried going off the grid by building his lodgings in Nevada's middle of nowhere, but it looks like he didn't consider the potential phone signal range needed to call the police."

"Whether you wanted to prove to your family that you were 'responsible' or not, that's still no excuse to steal car parts, Fidussen!" Officer Bruce told Alfred. "You're gonna face *more* than a fortune cut-off when you see the judge."

Johnathan and the twins give Alfred to the officers. They put his arms behind his back and handcuffed them. Officer Kraft opens the back door while Officer Bruce escorts Alfred to the back of the car. After Alfred gets in, Officer Bruce closes the door before turning to Johnathan and the twins.

"You three did a good job capturing Fidussen," Officer Bruce said. "How'd you catch him anyway, besides reflexively punching him, of course…"

"I was washing my hands after going to the bathroom in our room when I heard noises coming from Johnny's car outside," Gwen said. "I caught Alfred in a black ski mask underneath Johnny's car trying to steal the catalytic converter. I chased after him for a moment before I took his mask off."

"Was that when you reflexively punched Alfred?"

"Yes, Officer, and I'm so sorry I punched him-" Gwen said before being interrupted.

"It's okay," Officer Bruce said. "We'll let it slide this time. Just make sure to control your reflexes the next time you three deal with criminals like Alfred. Now let's get the heck out of here."

Officer Bruce walks back to the police car, signaling Officer Kraft to enter with him. After getting in, the two officers drive off with Alfred in the back as Johnathan and the twins look at the police car before looking at each other.

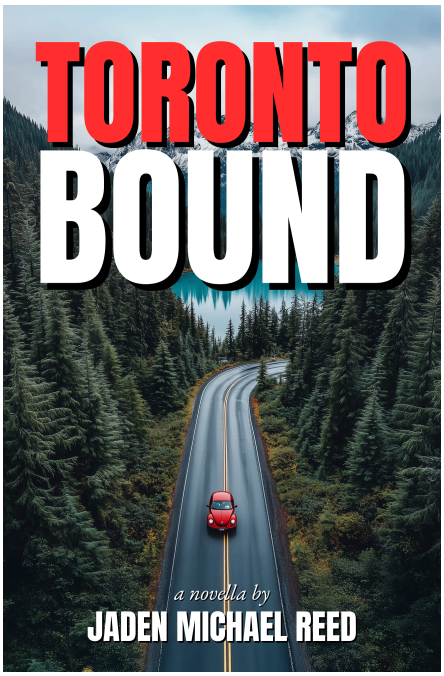
"Johnny, can I suggest a new rule?" Gwen asked.

"Yeah?" Johnathan asked.

"No more paid lodging."

Darn! That's the End (of the Sneak Peek).

Hi, I'm Jaden Michael Reed, a young writer with high-functioning autism and the author of the upcoming road trip novella, *Toronto Bound*. I hope you enjoyed the first three drafted chapters of my book! *Toronto Bound* is currently in the drafting phase and has yet to be edited by a professional editor. Feedback is still appreciated! I plan on self-funding the publishing and production of this book in the future (after I've finished the first draft, of course).



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